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# THE PHYSICIAN'S CALLING;

BEING AN

INTRODUCTORY LECTURE DELIVERED ON THE 15TH JUNE 1864,  
ON THE OPENING OF THE THIRTIETH SESSION OF THE  
MEDICAL COLLEGE OF BENGAL,

BY NORMAN CHEVERS, M. D.,

PRINCIPAL OF THE COLLEGE.

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GENTLEMEN,

I understand that the majority of those whom I address have elected to devote their lives to the practice of Medicine.

It is obligatory upon every man, when commencing his career of life, to start with a definite object.

It appears right that, upon this occasion, you, who to-day begin your course of enquiry as medical students, and I, who have been a student of Medicine for thirty years, should pause for a few moments at the threshold, and confer frankly upon the aims and objects of a Physician's career.

Many of us start in life disastrously unappreciative of that GREAT MISSION upon which the infinite mercy of the All-Wise has sent us forth into the world. We are too often fearfully oblivious of the fact that every human being is a creature placed here by God, charged with the performance of a particular duty.

Assuredly, every human being has his mission from on High, from the Cæsars and the Bacons, whose work is the world's progress, to the infant whose death first draws a mother's heart Heavenwards, in the belief that a glorified little face has its reward in waiting constantly to welcome her at the Pearly Gate, and will be clouded if she never comes.

It is not for us, ignorant servants, to comprehend, in their entirety, the mysterious intentions of the Great Master; but it is clear that, from the humblest to the mightiest, each human being has his own allotted task—his own special mission—in a world which, to use the words of Robert Boyle, is



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"a grand and noble machine continually actuated, informed,  
"and governed by a most wise and beneficent Being, who  
"keeps all the parts thereof in motion, and makes them act  
"one upon another according to certain laws."

It has not been granted to us to perceive the whole mechanism of the Great Mystery of Life, but it cannot be doubted that we all labor in the world, steadily working out some grand object, as a multitude toil at a vast building. From the sculptor who chisels the decorations, to the laborer who moulds the bricks, and the child who stirs the mortar, each has, under the eye of the Great Architect, his assigned task and duty.

This parallel does not, however, extend to *the payment* for the work—although some who think themselves practical men act as if they imagined that it does. Man pays for labor with gold. The Creator holds out to His workers an imperishable reward.

Whatever our faiths may be, each of us possesses within him the consciousness that, whether he be sent into the world as the cooly or as the rajah, as the conqueror or the slave, he has within him an immortal spirit, dependent, throughout eternity, upon its Creator for reward or punishment accordingly as its mission on earth shall have been well or ill fulfilled.

There are many men, especially young men, who consider that they have been sent into the world to revel, and love, and bask in the pleasant sunshine of indolence and wealth. There are many other men, especially old men, who hold that the main object of life is to achieve fame, and riches, and power, and to bequeath to their children the gifts of competence and hereditary rank. All of these are, doubtless, with large reserve, legitimate objects of life, but they are not The Object,—The Ultimate Aim of All. They are only accessories to that aim. They are the mere incentive concurrents of that force with which the Master compels His servants to perform His work.

We are not here, then, to accomplish any object, or achieve any destiny of our own. Still this God-imposed work is a Trust, upon the honest fulfilment of which we are all taught to believe our future reward or punishment depends.

Let the Physician especially beware lest he enter upon his work with a false understanding of its objects. A bad man cannot be a good physician. Every dishonest motive and

every brutal vice visibly drags its victim downwards in the stream of life, but it is especially in the physician's career that the detrimental operation of wrong aims and vicious principles and conduct becomes most flagrantly visible. I would rather meet a vicious ecclesiastic or an unjust judge than an unprincipled physician. The erring priest lives constantly in an atmosphere of holiness, and sees the path of repentance ever open before him ; the judge can seldom err more than once ; and then, probably, does so only under the pressure of some great temptation. He walks in the light of the world's gaze, and, if there be innocent blood upon his ermine, it will show. The physician's work is, in its own proper nature, mostly secret. Men of his own profession can form but a limited judgment of the manner in which he fulfils his great trust ; the public, having no just criterion by which to estimate his work, generally award him a reputation upon some fanciful caprice of its own, because he looks clever or talks well, or brought (or let us rather say *watched*) some person through an illness when all other doctors had given him up. To use the words of Samuel Johnson—"A physician in a great city seems to be the mere plaything of Fortune ; his degree of reputation is, for the most part, totally casual ; they that employ him know not his excellence ; they that reject him know not his deficiency."\* In fact, no man's manner of fulfilling his life's trust is less open to the world's inquisition than the physician's ;—here the grave tells no tales, and He who watches over all is silent.

The man of lax principles and dull conscience cannot be a good physician, because, under every temptation, he may dare, without peril of immediate detection, to be unfaithful to his trust.

The physician's trust is briefly this :—

It is the inevitable fate of every man to die, that is, to have his spirit separated from his body.

Originally, the Creator provided that this escape of the spirit from the flesh, this last and happiest act of life, this sweet sleep rewarding toil, should occur only after the lapse of many years, and then by a process as easy and as natural as that by which the sere leaves and the ripe fruit drop from the tree, and the tree itself falls in due season.

In the course of time, however, man's body has become liable to many accidents and to many diseases, the result of which is premature death. These injurious accidents, this disease, and this early death are, when viewed by the light of science, scarcely to be regarded as Providential inflictions or developments of natural laws, but rather as the self-evident consequences of man's own errors, and of his own reckless disregard of the laws of nature, which are the working laws of the Creator's great material system.

In permitting (rather than inflicting) disease, Infinite Mercy has provided certain *Remedial Agencies*.

The chief of these Remedial Agencies are an innate vital energy or *vis vitæ*, by force of which the body, when in health, strongly resists the invasion of disease, and also a faculty, whereby, whenever the germs of disease find entrance to the body, a series of powerful vital efforts is made to eliminate and cast them out of the system. For example, the consumptive patient's frightful wearing cough and profuse expectoration which, to many, must appear to be the worst part of his disease, are, in reality, evidences of nature's best efforts to remove certain tubercular deposits from the lungs which are, essentially, *the disease*.

The miserably painful ulceration in cancer is a similar effort to free the system from noxious material. This beautiful reparative faculty, inherent in all animal systems, is termed by physicians the *vis medicatrix naturæ*.

Further, man has been endowed with a certain amount of power both of preventing disease and of checking its ravages.

It is with a view of acquiring this power (of which an ancient sage exclaimed—"There is nothing in which man so nearly approaches the gods as in the power of giving health to the sick")—it is, I say, with a hope of possessing yourselves of this almost divine faculty that you, Gentlemen, have now commenced the study of the Healing Art.

This noble science of Medicine, practically, divides itself into two great systems, Prevention and Remedy.

The system of preventing disease, or Prophylaxis, has, of late years, taken the form of a separate science, popularly known as Sanitation. Medical research has enabled us to detect the sources of nearly all diseases, and to ascertain the beautiful fact that all causes of disease are either preventable or mitigable by certain attainable means,—such, for

example, as the proper cleansing of cities, the drainage and cultivation of marsh lands, and the maintenance of true morality.

Here let me digress for a moment to give you a strong illustration of that honest and humane spirit which, I may say without boasting, has, in all times, characterised the medical profession; a spirit which, if you are ever to become true physicians, you must certainly acquire. The direct and sole aim of Sanitation is to prevent that disease by the treatment of which physicians have, hitherto, lived. In a mere temporal point of view, the physician's advocacy of Sanitation is directly opposed to his own personal interests. Nevertheless, through good report and evil report, ridicule, opposition, and neglect, he steadfastly presses forward, assured in the conviction that his mission here is,—quite irrespective of his own fortune, nay even of his own life,—*to resist disease and death.*

Again, the entire science of Sanitation has been wrought out by physicians. Had they concealed its mysteries (which they might easily have done), handing them down as secret tradition, they might, not unreasonably, have calculated upon securing to themselves a power so enormous that its limit can scarcely be calculated. The physician might well have aspired to be monarch of a country upon whose people he had the power of conferring the blessings of long life and vigorous health, with their necessary results,—pre-eminence in war, in trade, in science, and in art, in all that makes a nation strong and dominant.

One of the first lessons which the physician teaches and acts upon, however, is that, in the science of medicine, there are no mysteries, and that he who, for his own personal advantage, conceals any knowledge which tends to the relief of suffering humanity, is, in the last degree, base and unworthy the name of physician. Consequently, the beautiful laws of Sanitation have been made so clear and so public by physicians that non-professional persons readily master their more salient points, and undertake the duties of sanitary administration.

I return to my main argument.

The relief or cure, by Remedial Measures, of those diseases which the, at present, very limited practice of Sanitation fails to prevent, constitutes the Practice of Medicine which, in its full sense, includes Surgery.

In learning to practice medicine, the student goes through the following principal steps:—

He first makes himself acquainted with the mechanism or anatomy of the bodies of men and of the lower animal creation; he then acquires the knowledge of the vital actions or functions of animal bodies, which is called Physiology. Hence he naturally advances to a study of these vital actions as perverted and modified in disease. This knowledge is termed Pathology, among the leading revelations of which is a fair comprehension of those *vires medicatrices naturæ*, or curative powers of nature, to which allusion has already been made. It is—and upon this point I cannot possibly insist too emphatically,—it is upon a thorough understanding of the structure and functions of the human body in health and disease, and upon a close study and observance of nature's curative powers, that the physician succeeds in controlling disease. Formerly, physicians believed that to them was given the power of *curing* disease; as knowledge has advanced, the physician has learnt that his skill is mainly effectual in aiding the attempts of nature to remove disease. Occasionally he finds that it is within his power to advance a step further, and to take out of the hands of nature a cure which, attempting, she fails to accomplish. This he does when he gives quinine in ague, taps a dropsy, removes a tumour, or amputates a shattered or mortified limb.

The physician can no more *cure* an inflammation of the lungs than he can drag down a planet; but, having a minute knowledge of the structure of the lungs, of the characters and mechanism of pulmonary inflammation, and of the means by which nature first pours out, and then begins to remove inflammatory products in the lungs, it is generally within his power validly to aid nature in her curative efforts.

It must, therefore, be evident that he is the best physician who has studied most closely, with a direct view to practice, the mechanism of animal bodies, and the working of their functions both in health and disease.

Hence, too, it becomes clear that nothing can be more wickedly presumptuous than the crime of him who, in ignorance of physiology and pathology, presumes to treat diseases by this drug or that. In its reckless temerity and deliberate cruelty, his crime transcends ten-fold that of him who robs to satisfy his hunger, or murders in the delirium of revenge.

Having thus given the briefest possible outline of the physician's calling, in regard to the nature of the science which he practises, I shall now occupy a very few minutes in considering the manner in which every physician is bound to prepare himself for the practice of medicine.

Apart from the faithful and laborious study of his chosen science in some College like this, the medical man stands absolutely in need of the most extended and comprehensive mental culture, acquired not only in a thoroughly sound preliminary school education, but also in the daily reading and research of a systematically studious and observant life.

We are to remember that all true knowledge materially aids the physician,—nay more, that he, the *Physicus* or *Physical Philosopher*, ranges through, and rules over all science relating either to matter or to mind and is to be regarded as the natural leader in all physical and metaphysical research.

We are told by a great modern philosopher\* that—“In the Christian world, the higher education is resolved into three *Faculties*, Theology, Jurisprudence, and Medicine, of which the first conducts our ~~mental~~ culture with reference to religion; the second with reference to the State and its business; the third, with reference to the material world, and the properties of its component parts. *For medicine, in its original and comprehensive sense, as one of the great divisions of human culture, must be considered as taking in the whole of physical science.*” Undoubtedly, as the same authority has elsewhere† explained, Physics, the doctrine of nature, have always been identified with the science of physic, and are inseparable from it.

I need scarcely insist upon the importance of a good preliminary education to a medical man. Such a training generally impresses a stamp of superiority upon the whole bearing, conversation, thought, and character, which they rarely fail to retain throughout all the trials and vicissitudes of existence, and which no labor in after-life can ever enable a man to attain.

Recollect that, throughout your active career, the intelligent public will never cease endeavouring to form an opinion of your professional attainments and mental depth; and that, if they

\* Whewell, *Elements of Morality, including Policy*, 1846, vol. 2, p. 321.

† *Notes and Queries, Third Series*, vol. 2, p. 394.

discover the evidences of your having been dull and idle school-boys, they will not hesitate to infer that you were stupid and neglectful medical students, and that, consequently, you are ill-informed and untrustworthy medical practitioners.

Such an inference would sometimes be erroneous, but most unfortunate is he who exposes himself to it.

I hope that I shall not be misunderstood when I say that I would not recommend you to become extremely deep and laborious readers during your studentship in this College. Attendance in hospital, in the dissecting room, and at lectures will take up a great part of every one of your days, and your evenings should be devoted to the close study of those standard works which your Professors will recommend as your guides ; but I have always thought that the students of this College, for the most part, read very much more than is necessary, and overlook the fact that the only sure mode of studying medicine and surgery and of gaining a real and practical acquaintance with disease, is to spend every spare hour in the hospital and post mortem room. As students, you will do well to imitate the example of Descartes, having a small library, and learning more from men and experiments than from books. When you have once gained a personal familiarity with disease, the perusal of the works of practical physicians and surgeons will have the effect of, as it were, enlarging your own experience. You will be so thoroughly capable of realising all that these truthful books describe that you will feel as if you had seen it yourself ; but, depend upon it, you will never become physicians and surgeons out of books any more than you could learn to ride by getting a treatise on horsemanship by heart. You will not, I am certain, suspect me of advocating idleness when I say that, among the many sad examples of failing promise which I have witnessed during my career, none have pained me so much as those of medical students, who, wearing out their powers of mind and body by over-application in College, either died early, or became by no means efficient practitioners in after-life. I do not pretend to think that this great mistake is often committed in the Bengal Medical College ; but recollect that you are about to engage, for life, in a very laborious profession, in which an over-taxed mind and a feeble body will reduce you almost to the condition of impostors seeking labour which you cannot duly perform. Be assured that the sick do not generally

demand aid from hesitating, timid, feeble-minded practitioners ; they prefer active, resolute, energetic, healthy-minded men, and show wise discrimination in doing so.

Having passed his examinations and entered into practice, the medical man ought to collect the best books, and to lose no opportunity of reading. This system should be continued throughout his career, his study being devoted principally to the standard medical treatises and professional periodicals, but also very largely to other scientific works, as well as to history and biography. Great advantage is gained by perusing the lives of men eminent for their virtues and attainments, especially of those who have become deservedly conspicuous in the paths of science and art, less by the force of genius than by steady industry ; for you may be assured that, in the study and practice of medicine, and also in the duties of the other learned professions, extraordinary genius and talent are by no means indispensable for the attainment of success, or even of eminence, always providing that the student feels that true and vivid interest in his subject without which very little learning is ever acquired. Highly cultivated common sense, moral purity, and steady indomitable labour are safe qualifications for ultimate distinction attainable by most well-educated youths of ordinary ability.

In recommending the study of general science to young medical practitioners, I would offer one practical caution, the necessity for which has often occurred to me, and which I do not recollect to have seen given elsewhere.

Early in life, I heard it enquired of one of my contemporaries, a very studious man and a truly able physician—Is it really true that So and So is eminent in your profession ? It is strange that he is always endeavouring to amuse us with little scientific commonplaces, mere trifles and platitudes. One day it is the electric light, another steam, another the diving bell at the Polytechnic.—Surely, he must be rather superficial !

This is a danger which young readers are very liable to fall into. Each fact in science, opening itself to them in all its beauty, is received with that admiration and pleasure which are the earliest rewards of enquiry. But you will do wisely to recollect that, in mixed companies, many of those present probably know, at least, as much of general science as you do.

Consequently, none but scientific experts should ever venture to be didactic in the presence of strangers.

I should have wished to say much to you here regarding the moral and social duties of medical practitioners. But our time is limited, and I hope to have some fitter opportunities of addressing those who are about to quit this College for active life.

I trust that I have succeeded in imparting to you my belief that no man can succeed in the profession which you have judiciously chosen, unless, from the beginning to the end of his career, he is deeply and practically impressed with the consciousness that he has come into the world with a very much higher object than that of providing for his own wants selfishly and instinctively as the lower animals do. He owes much to his neighbour; more to his Creator. He has to maintain the honor and reputation for learning and humanity of a noble and liberal profession; which, although not altogether ill-treated by the world, has never yet, in any nation or society, received that consideration and encouragement which it deserves. He has to practise and, if possible, to enlarge that most beautiful and beneficial science which, my Scripture teaches me, the Godhead Incarnate vouchsafed to administer when on earth,—going about healing the sick and doing good. Thus commissioned, the physician holds a place second only to that of the priest as a "MINISTER OF THE MYSTERIES OF GOD." Let him beware that he does not neglect or abuse his sacred trust. The obligations of the physician to his professional brethren are, owing to the peculiarity of their mutual relationship, singularly delicate. All medical men are not equally gifted or equally fortunate; and, as I have already explained to you, none are in a position to be fairly judged by the world. I should not go too far if I advised you generally to defend the reputations of your medical brethren, and to strive to advance their success. Many do this, and prosper in doing it; but I would adjure you, as you hope to receive reward in a higher state, and to dwell in peace and credit here, never to forget yourselves so lamentably, in the heat of the great race, as to dare to thrust a struggling brother dishonestly aside. To say nothing of higher considerations, a barrier rises against your own success immediately your pro-

depend upon it, no man ever meets with so much difficulty and opposition in life as the "sharp practitioner"),—and, from that day forth, there exists a person who, if he be a bad man, will scarcely fail to take his revenge, or who, unless he be a very good-tempered or a very good man, will always continue to regard you as one meriting judicial punishment, having been guilty of fighting the battle of life with unfair weapons.

Never forget that medicine is, essentially and literally, a *liberal* profession, and that unostentatious charity and kindness, especially to the sick poor, are not less the professional obligation of the good physician than they are the personal duty of the open-hearted gentleman.

Do not, for one moment, imagine that I would advise you to forego those legitimate gains of your profession which patients well able to render them are bound to offer you in return for professional services. On the contrary, I am convinced that, as a general rule, you should, in justice to your medical brethren, if not to yourself, expect and receive your duly-earned fees almost as strictly as men of the other liberal professions receive theirs, with these two exceptions—that you *cannot* receive payment for attendance, however arduous, upon a professional brother, his wife, or his child; and that you *ought not* to receive a fee from a Minister of Religion, if he be, in any sense of the term, a poor man.

In parting, let me again, for one moment, call your attention to the true aim and end of the honest physician's life. Some fifty years hence, probably much sooner, the youngest and most hopeful among you will feel that you are standing very near the portal of that Judgment Hall in which we all, Christians and Hindus, physicians and patients, dead to all the ambitions, and shams, and passions of this world, but intensely alive to our impending destiny in the world beyond, will pass before the presence of a Judge who never errs. I doubt not that, even there, many human thoughts will hurry across the conscience. I do not think that a recollection of the riches and titles which you had gained, of the triumph which you felt in outstripping your less fortunate neighbours, of the richness of your garments, the number of your servants, the state and beauty of your houses, the profundity of the salaams which you received from men of great quality at every turn, will be very welcome then;—but I believe that some weight will be given to the remembrance of how a white-haired

father's eye glittered when you showed him your first prize ; or told him that his son was a Doctor of Medicine ; of how some dying man gratefully pressed your hand ; of how you watched the night through beside some cooly woman in difficult labor ; of how some widow's grief was softened by your refusal of that gold which was more needed by her orphans than by your own children. These thoughts and such as these, I say, may possibly, mingling with higher and surer hopes, tend to uphold you in the trust that your plea for mercy will not be cast out.

I welcome you to this Profession of Medicine, and bid you enter upon it heartily and with strong courage, learning it diligently and practising it for the good of mankind and for your own benefit ;—never forgetting that the most successful physician is he who, in leaving this life, has best assurance of approval in the Life to Come.

